

House Armed Services Committee

DEMOCRATS

Ike Skelton, Ranking Member

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In a Time of War, Budget Needs to Do More for the Troops

Washington, DC – Congressman Ike Skelton (D-MO), Ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, released the following statement on the President's fiscal year 2006 budget for the Department of Defense:

"The Administration's budget request for fiscal year 2006 provides a welcome increase of \$19.3 billion above last year's funding level for the Department of Defense. Despite this significant increase, the budget request still underfunds or omits important programs for our troops and their families. In a time of war, providing for our troops, their families, and our veterans should be a top priority in order to shore up recruitment and retention. Our military is second to none, and we must keep it that way."

"Fighting the war in Iraq and against terrorism on multiple fronts is taking a toll on our ground forces and their families. With such large efforts underway in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere around the world, we are in danger of breaking our Army, especially the National Guard and Reserve.

It's a troubling omen when the budget more than doubles funding for the apprehension of Army deserters. At the same time, the Marine Corps failed to meet its recruitment goal for the first time in a decade, yet Marine Corps incentive pay in this budget remains virtually unchanged from the fiscal year 2005 level.

Our troops are the most highly trained and effective in the world, but this budget needs to do more to retain their expertise. This budget does provide a necessary \$19.3 billion increase in funding for the Department of Defense (excluding supplemental funding), but it should do more to help the Army and Marine Corps get ahead of a potential crisis in recruiting and retention.

Consider also that this budget:

- Only provides a bare minimum pay raise of 3.1 percent.

- Does not provide targeted pay raises to the troops who we most need to retain: senior enlisted personnel and junior and warrant officers.
- Does not contain funding to increase the death gratuity for the families of those killed in service to our nation. Although funding may be included in the upcoming supplemental request, those funds will only cover fiscal year 2005. Our efforts overseas will not end with the fiscal year on September 30, 2005—why should this important funding?
- Again puts off a decision to permanently increase the end-strength of the Army and Marine Corps.
- Does nothing to further eliminate the disabled veterans' tax (also known as concurrent receipt). This is not only a disservice to past military retirees, but it will eventually affect many of those who have been or could be wounded in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Including at least some of these measures in this budget request would have sent a message to our troops that their country understands and will fairly compensate them for the sacrifices they are making, now and after they retire.

Simply put, this budget could do more for our troops and their families. Last year, the budget projection for the Department of Defense for 2006 was \$422.7 billion. Thus, the actual request of \$419.3 billion for fiscal year 2006 is \$3.4 billion *less* than was projected just last year.

Instead of cutting \$3.4 billion, the administration could easily have lived within the defense budget constraints laid out last year and still have paid for targeted pay raises, the death gratuity beyond this fiscal year, and improved enlistment incentives.

There also would have been enough room for a good-faith down payment to either further reduce the disabled veterans' tax or permanently increase end-strength for the Army and Marine Corps.

I plan to work in a bipartisan fashion with both the Administration and my colleagues in Congress to address these key omissions. Our service men and women deserve to know that we have given our best effort to ensure both their wellbeing and that of their families.”

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